

How Did Christianity Begin?

James Crossley on the Gospels

This particular round of discussions begins with Bird and so it is not until he completes his remarks that Crossley takes bow in hand to launch a few arrows. '... The Synoptic Gospels do not have the developed view of Jesus that we find in mainstream Christian doctrine, and John's Gospel took some of the most important steps in the creation of Jesus as God. ... A comparison between the Synoptic Gospels ... and John's Gospel ... on the big issues of Law, Gentiles and Christology should be enough to begin to show the dramatic contribution of John's Gospel to Christian history' (p. 117), to which one is forced to reply- oh most certainly! And so Crossley demarcates his perceptions concerning the Gospels. He looks to Mark, and Matthew, and Luke to find evidence of their concepts of Jesus. He concludes that they have what theologians would call a 'low Christology' or perhaps even a 'no Christology' in the sense that they wouldn't have known Jesus as 'God'.

Again I have to take issue with his use of Talmudic materials as though they were contemporaneous with the Gospels because they are not. Still, he may be right to claim '... that there are no staggering claims made about Jesus being God in the Synoptic Gospels, in sharp contrast to John's Gospel' (p. 126). He certainly didn't need the support of the very, very late Talmudic texts to make that point. The Church has known ever since it accepted John's Gospel as 'scripture' that it was quite different than the other Gospels.

One more thing about the Synoptics that Crossley notes is worth comment- '... [while] this Jesus-as-Son tradition has Jesus functioning as the unique way to salvation and there are echoes of the elevated figure of Wisdom... there is no indication that such a statement was being used in the sense of Jesus being equal with God.. and, in sharp contrast to John's Gospel, there is no evidence of conflict over such claims' (p. 127). I'm not sure if Thomas Thompson's important book *The Messiah Myth* was available to Crossley but I feel confident that he must have heard of it. He would have benefited greatly in his argument in this chapter had he consulted it.

Though it pains me to do this, I am forced to point out an error that Crossley makes on page 128- where he writes 'To hit the point home...' Certainly it should be 'To drive the point home...' And he makes another (which someone in the editorial division ought to have caught) when, on page 132 he notes '... John's Gospel emergences from a Jewish context...' Surely he meant 'emerges'.

However, since I'm unwilling to end on that sort of negative note I'll instead quibble about another sentence in which Crossley sums up his take on the Gospel of John. '... The social situation behind John's Gospel might provide the immediate reasons why the Christians made the fateful step in equating Jesus with God and creating narratives explaining the controversies surrounding this equation' (p. 131).

Why is it a 'fateful' step? That seems to imply something sinister or perhaps even diabolical about the author of John. Crossley may not have meant it that way, but it's certainly a fair reading and one that needs to be considered. Perhaps a more felicitous word would have been 'important' or even 'inspired', since fateful denotes something negative and that surely cannot be laid at John's feet. He may be 'taken' negatively but his intention was certainly otherwise.

Next, the final round in which Crossley and Bird debate Christian Origins. Following that, we find the Bird ensnared!